

Planning for Snacks

What is a Snack?

A snack is a food and/or beverage consumed between meals when you are hungry or bored. It should be:

- nutrient-rich and planned as part of your daily menu.
- satisfying enough to “tide” you over until the next meal without spoiling your appetite.
- smaller than a regular meal.
- quick, convenient and easy to make.
- tasty and eye-appealing.
- low in fat (total, saturated and trans fat), sodium (salt), cholesterol, added sugars and alcohol.

Choose Snacks From MyPlate

A smart snack is a mini-meal that helps provide nutrients and food energy. It includes healthy choices from the five food groups in MyPlate, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s latest food guide. The food groups are grains, vegetables, fruits, protein foods and dairy products. Consume a variety of foods and beverages within each food group. Choose nutrient-rich items to get the most nutrition out of calories consumed.

A few examples of smart snacks are whole-grain breads and cereals, fresh vegetables and fruits, low-fat dairy and lean protein foods. A smart snack includes items from two of these food groups. For example, bean dip spread thin on crackers or a piece of fruit and low-fat milk.

For more information on the five food groups, go to www.choosemyplate.gov.

Keep Healthy Snacks on Hand

Planned snacks help you stay committed to a healthy diet. They also help to balance out the menu, especially if you are planning for children. Make snacking creative, interesting and fun by consuming an array of healthful foods and beverages in moderation.

Keep a variety of tasty, nutritious, ready-to-eat snacks available at home, at work, and anywhere else you need to take the edge off hunger. This will help eliminate unhealthy eating from vending machines, fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and a poorly-stocked home kitchen.

Stock your shelves, refrigerator and freezer with your favorite healthy snacks, such as cut-up raw vegetables (e.g. broccoli, cauliflower, carrots), favorite breads, muffins, bagels, pretzels, graham crackers, low-fat cheeses, string cheese, yogurt, pudding, fruit, low-fat ready-to-eat meats, 100% fruit juices and 100% vegetable juices. If you have children, stock a snack drawer in the refrigerator that they can reach and help themselves.

Do not buy tempting, high-calorie foods and fried foods, which are filled with fat and calories. This includes snacks such as French fries, burgers, regular soft drinks, doughnuts, cookies, candy bars, cakes and other prepackaged sweets.

When you buy items in bulk or occasionally splurge on some cookies, chips or ice cream, you should store them in an inconvenient place or out of sight (e.g. on a high shelf or in the back of the freezer).

Know When to Snack

A healthy snack satisfies between-meal hunger. It allows you to go to lunch or dinner without being overly hungry and able to make healthy choices.

Enjoy a snack two to three hours before a meal so that your appetite isn't ruined for the next main meal. Eat slowly to savor the flavor of the food.

Spread your snacks throughout the day. Going hungry for long periods may cause you to crave high carbohydrate foods (e.g. cookies and chips) that are often full of refined sugars, have too much fat and are low in fiber. Try not to do all your snacking in the evening.

Your child learns snack habits by watching you, so be a good role model. Do not snack "mindlessly" while watching TV or doing another activity. If you are bored, frustrated or stressed, find something else to do (e.g. take a walk, do your nails, read a book or play with your kids). Be aware that social situations (e.g. going to a party, dating or entertaining friends and family) also can trigger eating, even when you're not hungry.

Take a little time to talk to your child or do something fun with them. Sometimes children say they're hungry when they really want attention. Don't offer your child a snack to quiet tears, calm them or reward behavior. That can lead to emotional overeating later in life.

Remember to brush your teeth after snacking, especially after eating sugary and starchy foods, such as bread, crackers and sweet foods. Snacks that include milk or cheese help prevent tooth decay, while fruits and vegetables keep teeth and gums healthy.

Practice Portion Control

Eating a small portion of food can take away hunger pangs between meals without spoiling your appetite for the next meal. Pay attention to portion size, because many people eat enough for several servings. Examples of appropriate portion sizes are four to six crackers, one regular size muffin or a piece of fruit.

To limit the amount of food or drink consumed:

- Choose a small-size snack, and avoid "super," "mega" and other oversized items.
- Serve it in the smallest plate, bowl, cup or container possible.
- Share a large snack with a friend, or save some of it for later.

Try single serving packs, either the ones from the grocery store or packs that you make up yourself in zip lock bags. These are easy to carry and may keep you from over-eating the junk food that you really want. Be aware, however, that many of the 100-calorie snack packs from the grocery store are not nutritious.

If you buy a large package, divide the food into several small bags or containers. Usually you will eat more if you eat straight from a larger package or bowl.

Don't let a snack replace a meal. If a snack sometimes takes the place of a meal, however, choose meal-type food (e.g. a sandwich, a hearty salad or a small entrée).

Snacking does not cause weight gain. Regardless of what you eat and drink, you gain weight by consuming more calories per day than you use for energy. Most of the extra calories usually come from eating large portion sizes, sweet and salty snacks, regular soft drinks and food purchased away from home. When you eat high-calorie items, balance them with plenty of low-calorie foods.

Read Food Labels

Always read the Nutrition Facts Food Label on snack foods. Compare products to decide which one is best for you.

The Nutrition Facts label will help you determine the fat, sodium, cholesterol, vitamin, mineral and fiber content of foods, as well as the number of calories. Choose foods and beverages that are low in fat (total, saturated and trans fat), cholesterol, salt, added sugars and alcohol.

Consider the serving size and the number of servings in the container. Sometimes snack packages provide more than one serving. If the

package says “Serves 2,” it contains twice the calories listed on the Nutrition Facts panel.

Check the ingredients list, which tells what’s in the food. All ingredients are listed in order of weight, or concentration, with the largest amount listed first and the smallest amount listed last. Avoid cookies, bakery products and other foods that contain coconut, palm and palm kernel oils, as well as trans fats and hydrogenated fats. The word hydrogenated is the process of adding more hydrogen to vegetable oils, which makes them saturated and unhealthy.

Beware of “low-fat” foods, which may have the same calories as regular foods. Sugar often replaces the fat to keep the flavor.

Eat whole fruits and vegetables, which contain fiber and other nutrients not found in juice. Drink juice in moderation, and always choose 100% vegetable juice and 100% unsweetened fruit juice.

Healthy Snacking Tips

- Use snacks to fill the nutritional gaps in your diet.
- Choose a solid snack, which satisfies longer than a liquid snack. Research shows that people eat less food at mealtime if they consume a solid snack than a liquid snack with the same amount of calories.
- Vegetables and fruits are good snack choices, because they are low in calories and high in fiber, vitamins and minerals. They also can decrease the risk for certain cancers and heart disease. Seasonal vegetables and fruits taste great and are less expensive.
- Choose snacks that provide dietary fiber as well as other nutrients. Some good sources of dietary fiber are fresh fruits with edible seeds (berries) or skins (apples, peaches), dried fruits, raw vegetables and whole-grain bread or crackers (whole-wheat, rye).
- Enjoy a lean-protein food with a small amount of fat. This makes you feel satisfied and staves off hunger longer. Protein takes longer to digest, and fat helps slow the amount of time that food reaches your intestines from the stomach.
- Surround yourself with healthy snacks in small portions. Stash them in your

refrigerator, desk drawer, briefcase, backpack, gym bag and car.

- Try new food or different forms of your old favorites, such as frozen bananas or grapes.
- Eat sensible portions. Single-serve containers can help you limit portion sizes. Choose the smallest plate, bowl or container possible, because the bigger the container, the more you tend to eat, although you think you’re eating the same amount. Don’t eat directly from the package. Skip “super” and “mega” size drinks and snacks.
- Be aware that adding snacks on top of your usual diet may lead to weight gain.
- When you have a high-fat snack during the day, eat a low-fat dinner to stay within your daily limits of calories, fats and salt.
- At an office celebration, eat only a small piece of cake. When it’s your turn to bring a snack, bring bagels and fruit instead of doughnuts.
- Let your child decide when they’ve had enough. If they are still hungry after eating an amount appropriate for their age, then let them ask for more.

Healthy Snacks

When you crave something sweet, sour, salty, savory, crunchy or chewy, choose a healthful snack that is low in calories, added sugar and fat like these foods and beverages.

- apple or banana with peanut butter*
- cheese sandwich
- string cheese or individually wrapped cheese slices
- carrot sticks or other ready-to-eat raw veggies with low-fat dressing or tofu dip
- cereal with milk
- fruit and yogurt smoothie
- fortified cereal bar
- fruit flavored yogurt
- frozen fruit bar
- canned fruit packed in juice
- peanut butter and pretzels
- whole-wheat crackers with bean dip
- hummus (chickpea dip) and pita bread
- salsa and baked tortilla chips
- 100% unsweetened fruit or vegetable juice

- glass of plain or chocolate milk
- hard-cooked egg
- cold piece of roast chicken
- trail mix (ready-to-eat cereals mixed with raisins or other dried fruit)
- ¼ cup nuts
- ¼ cup sunflower seeds

*Slicing the fruit makes it seem like more food. Natural peanut butter tastes like real peanuts and has no added sugar or salt.

Healthy Beverages

Many beverages provide important nutrients while quenching your thirst. However, other beverages provide lots of calories and little else. Follow these tips when choosing a nutritious beverage.

- Water is a low-cost drink that satisfies thirst without adding calories or sugars. Calorie-free seltzer or sparkling waters also are healthy choices.
- Choose only 100% vegetable and fruit juices, which do not contain added sugar or high fructose corn syrup. Although 100% juices can be part of a healthful diet, they lack dietary fiber found in whole fruits and vegetables and when consumed in excess can contribute extra calories. The majority of fruits and vegetables consumed should come from whole or cut up pieces. Limit fruit juice to six ounces per day for one- to six-year-olds and 12 ounces per day for seven- to eighteen-year-olds. Remember that punches, ades and most fruit “drinks” contain only a little juice and lots of added sugars. A 12-ounce serving of fruit drink or ade contains about 12 added teaspoons of sugar. Non-diet soft drinks have about 9 teaspoons of added sugars but little nutritive value.
- Drink low-fat and fat-free milk instead of whole and 2% milk. Children will get the same amount of calcium, vitamin D and other nutrients without all the fat found in whole and 2% milk. However, do not give low-fat or fat-free milk to a child under the age of two, because they need the extra fat to grow and develop.
- Low-fat soy, almond and rice “milks” also are healthy choices if they are fortified with

calcium and vitamin D. Read the label to check for fortification.

- Consuming four to six cups of green, black or oolong teas, which contain antioxidants, may reduce your risk of gastric, esophageal and skin cancers and may protect you from heart disease and stroke.

Vending Machine Snacks

Some vending machine snack items are better than others. Choose a single-serving item that is either low in fat or low in sugar, and skip the candy bars. Read the food label to find out the number of servings in the package, because sometimes snack packages provide more than one serving.

Pretzels, which are low in fat, are always a good choice, although they are high in carbohydrates. Scrape off the salt to reduce the sodium content. Other good choices include: a piece of fresh fruit, sugar-free yogurt, milk, bottled water, fig bars, trail mix, peanuts, light popcorn, whole grain crackers and baked chips.

If you must eat something sweet, choose a small bag of peanut M&M’s instead of regular M&Ms, because the peanuts provide a little protein. Crackers with peanut butter provide some protein, but they also are high in fat. A fudgsicle, sugar-free hot chocolate or chocolate pudding, or a Peppermint Pattie are much lower in fat and calories than a chocolate bar or M&Ms.

To make it hard to buy a high calorie snack, don’t carry money for vending machines. Plan ahead and take a nutritious snack or meal from home instead.

What if you have to choose between eating food from a vending machine and skipping a meal? Then grab something from the vending machine, but make your choice as healthful as possible.

For More Information

For additional information on snacks for children and teens, refer to [HGIC 4115, *Smart Snacking*](#). To learn more about calorie-controlled snacking, refer to [HGIC 4123, *Snacks With 100 Calories or Less*](#).

Sources:

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Pineapple-Kiwi Salsa

- 1 c. diced pineapple (fresh or canned in juice)
- 1 c. peeled and diced kiwi (about 2 or 3 whole kiwi)
- 2 T. chopped fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and minced
- 1 T. fresh lime juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper



In a medium bowl, combine the pineapple, kiwi, cilantro, jalapeno, and lime juice and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.